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ABSTRACT

This study set out to explore possible differences in college students' perceptions and use of teaching assistants' (TA) office hours depending on whether their TAs were native or nonnative speakers of English. A total of 31 TAs, including 16 native and 15 nonnative speakers of English, from a major American university completed a questionnaire on their office hours and student usage of office hours. A total of 385 undergraduates, including 278 native and 200 nonnative speakers of English, completed a questionnaire on their use of TA office hours. The results indicated that both students and TAs acknowledged the importance of office hours, with students reporting attending office hours an average of twice per course. The native language of the TA was not related to either student perceived importance of office hours or to student attendance. Statistical analyses indicated that female students, students with the same major as their TA, students in certain departments, and those who attended office hours more frequently considered office hours more significantly important than others. Two appendixes provide copies of the TA and student questionnaires. (MDM)

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ED 406 886

A SURVEY ON NATIVE AND NONNATIVE TAs' OFFICE HOURS: IMPORTANCE, ATTENDANCE AND CONTENT

JUAN CARLOS GALLEGO

FL 030 044

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a survey sent to a sample of teaching assistants (native and nonnative) and university undergraduates about office hour consultations: their importance, student attendance and their content. It also explores possible differences between native and nonnative ((NNSTA) office hours because of a concern with the limited language skills of NNSTAs. The results showed that both students and TAs acknowledge the importance of office hours, with students reporting attending office hours an average of twice per quarter and per course. However, about sixty per cent would like to attend more times (they do not because of lack of time), while TAs also think students do not use office hours enough.

Chi-square statistical procedures showed that female students, students who belong in the same major as their TA, students in certain departments, and those who attend office hours more frequently consider office hours significantly more important than their counterparts. TA nativeness, however, seemed to make no difference in this respect.

Finally, students reported spending most of their time at office hours dealing with term papers or lab reports, while TAs and students also identified dealing with course materials, homework and exam preparation as primary office hour activities.

A survey on native and nonnnative TAs' office hours: importance, attendance and content

Office hours can be defined as out-of-class consultations where students meet with their professor or teaching assistant (TA) for individual consultation. They offer students the opportunity to expand and clarify what has been presented in class, to relate to their instructor in a more personal way, to voice personal concerns, to seek help with exams, homework, and term papers, and to discuss grades and other administrative matters (McChesney, 1994). That the office hour is a teaching environment with characteristics of its own and great teaching/learning potential is recognized by researchers and reflected in TA training textbooks (see, for example, Byrd et al., 1989, Pica et al., 1990, and Smith et al., 1992).

This study set out initially to explore possible differences in students' perceptions and use of office hours depending on whether their TAs were native or nonnative speaking (NNS). It was hypothesized that undergraduate students' complaints about the poor language skills of their NNSTAs (see Bailey, 1984 and Heller, 1985, among others) would be reflected in the importance they attribute to office hours and in their attendance at this type of consultations.

In order to contextualize the problem and gain a better understanding of the office hour consultation activity in the university setting, the relationship between perceived importance and attendance and a number of variables such as 'gender', 'major', 'department', 'year in

school', and 'TA teaching experience', was also explored. The office hour consultation is further described based on TAs' and students' reported uses of this activity.

The survey

A survey was given to forty teaching sections representing ten departments and several schools on a major US university campus (see TA survey in Appendix A and student survey in Appendix B). The departments represented are: Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science, Economics, Geography, Linguistics, Mathematics, Psychology, Sociology, and Spanish and Portuguese. The graduate advisors in these departments were asked to select four TAs (two native and two nonnative) who were teaching undergraduate courses and to give them the surveys, which the TAs and their students were to fill out during the last week of classes.

Thirty-one out of forty TAs who were sent the office hour survey (Appendix A) completed and returned it. Three hundred and eighty-five students from twenty-seven sections also completed and returned the student version of the survey (Appendix B)--in some sections the TA filled out the questionnaire whereas the students did not, thus the discrepancy between the number of TAs and the number of sections. Of the ten departments selected to represent various schools and disciplines on campus, nine are represented in the sample by at least two sections of students each, with at least one section being taught by a NNSTA. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the biographical data gathered through the surveys for TAs and students respectively.

Table 1

TA survey: descriptive information (numbers and percentages)

TAs (N)	Native	Nonnat.	Male	Female	#Students (mean)	*#qtrs.TA (mean)
31	16	15	14	17	22.37	5.1
	51.6%	48.3%	45.1%	54.8%		

* Number of quarters the TA has taught at the university.

Table 2

Student Survey: descriptive information (numbers and percentages)

N	Native	Nonnat.	Male	Female	*Same major	*Differ. major
385	278	100	226	159	103	280
	73.5%	26.5%	58.7%	41.3%	26.9%	73.1%

*Same major as or different major from TA's.

	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior	Graduate
	99	97	105	74	3
	26.2%	25.6%	27.8%	19.6%	.8%

As tables 1 and 2 show, there is enough representation in the data to allow for comparisons based on the native-nonnative distinction, gender, same as or different major from TA, student's year in school, and TA's

teaching experience. The same is true of the variable 'department', which is not included in the tables. This variable classifies TAs and students into nine categories--one for each of the departments where a particular section was taught at the time of the survey.

Answers to question one in both survey forms, " the importance of office hours", are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3
Survey Question 1: Importance of office hours *(scale: 0 to 3)

Subjects	Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximun	N
TAs	1.867	.86	0	3	30
Students	1.618	.81	0	3	382

*Scale: Not at all impt.=0; somewhat impt.=1; important=2; very impt.=3.

The averages for this question were calculated by transforming the categories provided into a numerical, four-point scale ranging from zero or *not at all* to three or *very important*. As table 3 shows, students and TAs considered office hours from somewhat important to important, the TA's average being slightly higher. When comparing this variable with some of the variables in tables 1 and 2, such as 'TA native language', 'TA gender', 'department', 'student native language', 'student gender, and 'student major', using a Chi-square statistical procedure and setting the level of significance at $p<.05$, some significant relations were found.

In responding to the main concern of the study, the variable 'TA native language' (i.e., native/nonnative) does not appear to relate significantly (alfa =.05) to either student perceived importance of office hours or to student attendance. This finding is counter to the general feeling of dissatisfaction assumed on the part of university undergraduates (see references above). It may be that foreign accent and limited language skills are less problematic in one-on-one TA-student interactions than in classroom settings. If this were the case, students of NNSTAs would be expected to attend office hours more often than students of NSTAs. However, the findings do not support that hypothesis.

Of the remaining variables analyzed, none of them related significantly to student attendance, but some appeared to relate to perceived importance, as the tables below illustrate.

Table 4
Student Survey results
Chi-Square X1: student major; Y1: importance of office hours

Observed Frequency Table

	same	differ	Totals:
0	2	21	23
1	32	124	156
2	45	99	144
3	22	35	57
Totals:	101	279	380

Chi Square: p=.0057

Table 5
Student Survey results
Chi-Square X1: student gender; Y1: importance of office hours

Observed Frequency Table

	male	fem	Totals:
0	17	6	23
1	73	82	155
2	61	83	144
3	21	36	57
Totals:	172	207	379

Chi Square: p=.019

Table 6
Student Survey results
Chi-Square X1: department; Y1: Importance of office hours

Observed Frequency Table

	bio	chem	comp sci	econ	geo	ling	math	psych
0	2	1	1	4	1	5	3	0
1	25	28	10	19	17	22	12	4
2	20	26	11	10	13	16	13	12
3	15	10	3	6	5	3	2	11
Totals:	62	65	25	39	36	46	30	27

Observed Frequency Table

	span	Totals:
0	6	23
1	20	157
2	24	145
3	2	57
Totals:	52	382

Chi Square: p=.0051

As tables 4, 5, and 6 indicate, the variables 'student major', 'student gender', and 'department' relate significantly to the variable 'importance of office hours' for the students in the sample. More specifically, students with the same major as their TA's and female students rated office hours higher thant non-majors and males (Tables 4 and 5 respectively). At the same time, students in the department of Psychology rated office hours the highest, followed by students in the Physical Sciences (Biology and

Chemistry), Engineering (Computer Science), and Mathematics. Students in other departments rated office hours the lowest (Table 6).

In responding to question two in the survey (see Appendix B), students reported attending office hours two times on average during the Fall quarter and for the particular course they were questioned about. About thirty percent of the total never attended office hours, another thirty per cent attended once or twice, and the remaining thirty-five per cent (approximately) attended more than three times, up to a maximum of ten times (no table provided). The TAs, on the other hand, reported that on a four-category scale ranging from 'never' to 'all the time' most students attended office hours from 'occasionally' to 'frequently' (the two middle categories). The TAs also reported that about sixty percent of the students came to office hours that quarter in particular; this confirms student-reported attendance (questions 2 and 3 in the TA survey, respectively--see Appendix A). These responses suggest that TAs do not think office hours are used to their full potential, and, specifically, that a sixty percent attendance rate (and an average of twice per student per quarter as reported by the students) is regarded by TAs as acceptable but below optimum.

When relating the variable 'attendance at office hours' to the students' reported 'importance of office hours' using a Chi-square statistical procedure, the result proved to be significant (see Table 7 below), indicating that students who attach a higher value to office hours also attend more frequently--an intuitively sound finding.

Table 7

Student Survey

Chi-Square X1: times attended; Y1: importance of office hours

Observed Frequency Table

	zero	one-two	three+	Totals:
0	18	5	0	23
1	72	66	19	157
2	24	43	76	143
3	4	11	40	55
Totals:	118	125	135	378

Chi Square: p=.0001

According to the TAs' answer to question 4 in the survey (see Appendix A), students asked questions from 'occasionally' to 'frequently' about the following issues (in order of frequency, beginning with the most frequent): 'exam preparation' (in eight departments); 'course materials' (in six); and 'homework' (in five). In four departments, students were also reported to attend office hours to 'pick up grades' with similar frequency, making exam and grade-related matters the most important issue students come to office hours for, according to the TAs in the sample.

The students' reply to the same question, only asked in terms of actual time spent at office hours dealing with those issues (see question 3 in the student survey, Appendix B), yielded the following results: the greatest amount of time was spent dealing with a 'term paper' or a 'lab report' (about 29 minutes per student on average), followed by 'exam preparation' (about 16.5 minutes), 'homework' (about 12.5 minutes), and 'course materials' (about 11.5 minutes). Time spend dealing with the remaining issues ranged between two and four minutes per student on average.

As can be seen from the results presented above, TAs and students agreed in identifying 'homework', 'exam preparation', and 'course materials' as three of the most frequent issues addressed during office hours, but, unlike the TAs, the students selected 'term paper/lab report' as the issue they spent the most time with during office hours. This discrepancy highlights a difference in perception that can only be cleared out through observation or videotaping of the office hour consultation.

Question 4 in the student survey asked students whether they would have liked to attend office hours more often and, if so, why they did not (see Appendix B). Sixty-five per cent of the respondents said they would have liked to attend more often, while eighty-six per cent of these stated that 'time' was the reason they did not, either because of lack of it or because of time confict. The other options proposed in the question, such as 'shyness/embarrasment', 'TA difficult to understand', etc., were selected by less than ten per cent of the students each. Question 4 results ratify again the general findings for question one, that

students consider office hours relevant and thus they would attend them more often if they had the time.

Conclusions

In this paper we have explored some aspects of the office hour consultation through a survey sent to a sample of TAs and university undergraduates at a major U.S. university. The results have shown that students and TAs consider office hours to be an important teaching/learning activity. In addition, it was found that students attend such activity twice per quarter (and per course), a ratio that both TAs and students appear to consider insufficient. Students blame lack of time or time conflicts for their low attendance to office hours.

When applying Chi-square statistical procedures to some student and TA variables, it was found that students studying within the same major as their TAs, female students, and students in the departments of Psychology, Biology, Chemistry, Computer Science and Mathematics valued office hours significantly higher than their counter parts. Another significant relation was found between student reported attendance to and their perceived importance of office hours.

The survey also attempted to find differences in student responses depending on whether the TAs were native or nonnative. No significant differences were found in this regard, suggesting that the so-called 'foreing TA problem' might not be as serious in the context studied here, although more detailed and ethnographically oriented studies would be

required to respond to this question adequately (see Gallego 1992 for one such study).

Finally, TAs and students coincide in identifying office hours as the locus where students primarily consult with their TAs about course materials, homework, and exam preparation. Students, however, selected dealing with term papers or lab reports as the one issue they consult the most about.

The results of this survey may have two different applications: 1) to provide an overall picture of the office hour as a teaching/learning activity in the university setting, which would serve as a framework and background for further, more detailed studies of this activity; and 2) to gain understanding about the office hour, in particular concerning a hypothetical problem students might have with NNSTAs, that would allow changes and improvements in the university system in general and in TA and ITA programs in particular.

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Appendix A

TA SURVEY: OFFICE HOURS

Department:_____
Course number:_____Course titlle:_____
Native language:_____Male:___ Female:___
Total number of registered students in this section:_____
How many quarters have you been a TA at UCLA?_____

1-Based on your overall experience as a TA, how important do you think office hours are for students? (Circle one.):
Not at all; Somewhat: Important; Very important;

2-How often have the students in this section come to your office hours this quarter? (Circle one):
Never; Occasionally; Frequently; All the time;

3-Approximately how many different students in this section have come to at least one office hour this quarter?

_____

4-How frequently did the students in this section ask you questions about the issues listed below during office hours this quarter? (Add new ones if appropriate): (Please write 0=never, 1=occasionallly, or 2=frequently, next to each issue, depending on frequency)

-Homework _____
-Term paper/lab report _____
-Catching up _____
-Course materials _____
-Discussing grading _____
-Exam preparation _____
-Picking up grades/materials
-_____

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Appendix B

STUDENT SURVEY: OFFICE HOURS

This questionnaire is part of a project for the TA Training Program to determine the relevance and instructional uses of office hours on campus. Your answers will help us improve the quality of undergraduate instruction at UCLA. The information requested is anonymous and completely confidential.

Thank you very much for your cooperation. J.C. Gallego

Course number:_____Course title:_____
Native language:_____Male:___ Female:___
Major: _____Undeclared?: _____
Circle one: Fresh.; Soph.; Junior; Senior; Grad.;

1-How important are office hours for you in general? (Circle one):
Not at all; Somewhat: Important; Very important;

2-How many time have you gone to an office hour this quarter for this particular course? (If you don't remember exactly, write an approximate number of times.)

_____

3-Approximately how long (total in hours and minutes) have you spent talking to your TA about each one of the issues below during office hours for this particular course this quarter? (Please add new issues if appropriate.):

-Homework _____
-Term paper/lab report ____
-Catching up _____
-Course materials _____
-Discussing grading _____
-Exam preparation _____
-Picking up grades/materials
-_____

4- Would you have liked to go to office hours more often for this course? (Circle one):

Yes; No;

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